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El Niño

Juliet Waters

A Thesis

in

The Department

Of

Creative Writing

**Presented In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

El Niño

Juliet Waters

David Leavitt writes: "if the novel is the marriage, the novella is a prolonged infatuation, an extended holiday." Although Leavitt is discussing the relationship of the writer to his work, infatuations and extended holidays tend also to be the favourite subjects of the novella. *El Niño*, keeps with this tradition. Written from the perspective of Charlotte Winters it tells the story of her infatuation with her boyfriend, Green, and their road trip through the South Western U. S. and Mexico. As they travel, their relationship disintegrates into a war of intimate terrorism and they become entangled in a psychodrama of projected hostility, envy and pity. The question that *El Niño* grapples with is "how is it that the love between men and women can seem like an increasingly scarce resource that needs to be fought over like land or language or money?" And is it?

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Preface

When you write, you lay down a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

When I wrote the proposal for this thesis, three months ago, it seemed to me that I had found "my subject" and that it could be easily explored within a novella about a six-month road trip through the U.S., Mexico and Central America. At that time the question I was grappling with was how love can seem like an increasingly scarce resource that needs to be fought over like land, or money, or even language. My subject was the forms of intimate terrorism that evolve from this battle.

Having little experience building the structures of longer works of fiction, I found myself despairing after about eighty pages, when this subject continued to elude me.

Finally it seemed to reappear towards the mid-point of a longer work of about three hundred pages. But by that time, the deadline I was committed to, and the limitations on the length allowed for a masters thesis, made it impossible for me to explore it in any depth.

All I seemed to have for my efforts were the crumbs along the trail I'd followed. However, after sifting through them, I discovered a different subject

that I hope will give coherence to the first section of what I believe is part of a longer work.

I have tried to remove loose nails of narrative and to plaster over themes that may seem discarded without the benefit of the entire work. But some narratives and ideas are bearing walls that, at this point I haven't figured out a way to remove, without watching the whole building disintegrate.

It is my hope that "El Niño" has enough unity to survive on its own, even if it ends up as the first third of a longer work. My intention is to present a narrative where, even if closure is not provided by the actual plot, coherence is created by playing with references to more symbolic cycles that readers would be familiar with.

Salt Lake City

Utah University Hospital

June 2, 1996. 1 p.m.

With what little is left of her vision, Charlotte Winters still catches a glint of malevolence in the look the ER nurse gives Green. Any man who brings a woman with a black eye into Emergency is given this look, even if the man seems like a good Mormon, which Green definitely does not. He stares back at the nurse with a granite-eyed innocence that makes him appear like a Sephardic cherub with glasses.

"How did this happen?" the nurse asks Charlotte.

"I was hit in the eye with a bungee chord"

"You were bungee chord jumping?"

"No. No. I was trying to close the back door of our van, out in the parking lot of Ruth's Diner. I didn't realize that my boyfriend had attached it open with a bungee chord. It flew off and hit me in the eye."

"How long ago?" The nurse drops Green from her gaze and starts to fill in information on the admissions form.

"An hour...?" Charlotte questions Green with her surviving eye. Neither she nor Green wears a watch and Charlotte isn't sure what the shock of being suddenly half blind might have done to her time perception.

"Twenty-minutes." Green continues to stare at the nurse, "But I'm not sure how long we've been stuck in the waiting room."

"It looks serious." Somehow the nurse manages to convey both concern for Charlotte and indifference to Green. "I'll get you a doctor as soon as possible. In the meantime you can talk to Accounts."

Accounts is in an admitting room that seems unusually small to Charlotte. Or maybe it's the Utah residents who seem unusually big. Or maybe it's just her focus. The bungee chord hit her good eye. Her remaining eye has always been what her ophthalmologist called "lazy."

"Do you have medical insurance, miss?" says the woman at the Accounts wicket

"Yes. No. I'm Canadian. I think I have to pay and then I get reimbursed by Canadian Medicare."

"Do you have an address in the United States where we can send the bill?"

"Yes." Charlotte gives her the address of her parents' summer cottage in Vermont.

"Thank you, miss. Now can you just fill out this form?"

Charlotte is surprised at how simply this problem is solved. She was expecting some fierce American computerized credit check. Not that she's too worried. Green has money.

Except his credit cards aren't working today. Charlotte knows it's just a matter of him calling his bank in Montreal. Green's smart at making money, but

disabled when it comes to managing it. Charlotte, unfortunately, isn't very good at either. She has enough room on her credit cards to last them awhile, but it wouldn't be enough to cover a huge hospital bill. Now at least she doesn't have to worry about anything until she talks to her parents.

After she finishes filling out the form, Charlotte returns to the over-lit dullness of the admitting room. She puts her head on Green's shoulder and breathes in light sweat as he puts his arm around her. Until yesterday, when she arrived at the Salt Lake City airport, it had been three months since she'd seen Green.

They've been reunited now for less than twenty-four hours, and the familiar smell of his skin is the only thing warding off total despair. "This is such a fucking drag," she says.

Green isn't the kind of guy to tell her everything is going to be all right, when maybe it isn't. "Don't worry we're going make sure you get the best care possible. And then we're going to take you to a comfortable place to rest."

"Miss Winters?"

Charlotte looks up at a tall, elderly doctor. "I'm Doctor Keller. Do you want to follow me and we'll go take a look at that?"

Green stands up with Charlotte, but Doctor Keller pierces him with a look that seems specially forged for the Iraqi Jew boyfriends of pale, blond-haired, eye-injured women. "I'd prefer Miss Winters come alone." Green nods at him silently.

Dr. Keller tests her eye but Charlotte can see nothing, not even light.

"Sorry," he says after probing into her eye with a special instrument. "I can't see anything either. The front chamber is too full of blood so it's impossible to tell how far this thing has penetrated. We'll have to send you over to the Moran Eye Center. There's more sophisticated equipment there. It's Sunday so there's a resident on call, but it might take a little while for her to come in."

A pretty East Indian volunteer wheels Charlotte over to the Moran Eye Center. It turns out to be at the end of so many long corridors that the volunteer gets lost. She must return to make sure they're in the right place.

She leaves Charlotte in a large empty reception area. One wall is nothing but windows overseeing the Wasatch Range. Her lazy eye makes the snow capped Rocky Mountains dance. She turns it instead towards the tropical fish in an oversized aquarium set into the adjacent wall. But the darting colours start to make her nauseous, and she's getting a headache.

Charlotte tries not to think of the consequences of being half-blind. For the last three years she's been supporting herself mainly with her book review column at *The Montreal Sun*. This could mean the end of her burgeoning career as a literary journalist. But after a few minutes of trying to push these thoughts out of her mind, she starts to sense that what she's pushing away isn't actually despair, but relief. She doesn't want to be blind, but she knows this isn't the first time she's had the feeling that literature is fucking up her life.

Fifteen minutes have gone by and the volunteer has not returned. Charlotte burps up that afternoon's lunch from Ruth's Diner. She had a

"Lamborghini", which was a lamb burger with mint and jalapeno jelly. Her memory follows the smell back to the parking lot where Green is off in the flowery spring bushes taking a piss and Charlotte, just returning from the bathroom, has noticed that the van door is open and his IBM Think Pad is lying unguarded on his bed.

It isn't really a van. It's a short silver school bus that's been turned into a mobile living room. The seats have been replaced by two couches wide enough to sleep on. In the aisle between the couches is a fold out desk. In the corner of one end of the bus is a glass cabinet with books, and on top of this is a television and VCR. Above each couch are two tight hammock-type storage areas where Charlotte and Green have put their clothes.

Alfred Pennington, author of *The New Nomad*, an alternative travel guide classic, painted the van silver and built the interior. Before it had been a military brown, but Alfred believed it needed to be painted a less threatening colour if they were going to be driving through Central America.

Originally he and Green were supposed to be travelling together, setting out from Toronto where Alfred lived. Charlotte had never met Alfred. She went to Toronto to see them off, but knew after two days that they weren't going to last very long together.

Alfred was a new-age health freak, up every morning at 6 a.m. on the Internet editing his Tech Nomad newsletter. It isn't unusual to find Green on the Internet at 6 a.m., but this would be at the end of his day, if let's say he'd done too much coke and couldn't fall asleep, which happened occasionally.

When it did, you'd find him with one hand on a mouse and the other hand stubbing out a Marlboro in two days worth of butts, which for the average smoker would be a week's worth.

Green is the most cynical person Charlotte's ever known, so she was surprised to see him wiping away tears when he said goodbye to her. Not only that, but earlier that day he'd asked her what she wanted more than anything in the world. When she said, "beach front property", he said "you'll have it someday, baby. I promise." On the way back to Montreal she decided to ask for an indefinite leave of absence from her column.

This wouldn't be hard to get since Green owned half of *The Sun*. Alice Seymour, Green's ex-wife, owned the other half. But she wouldn't care. She seemed to pity Charlotte more than she envied her.

Three weeks later Green e-mailed Charlotte that he'd paid Alfred for the van and dropped him off at the Phoenix airport. Charlotte and Green decided to meet in Salt Lake City for the Annual conference of the Association of Alternative Weeklies. This would give her time to get ready for the trip.

Ostensibly, Green was taking a year long sabbatical, but only Charlotte knew that he was probably never coming back. She suspected by the end of the year he'd be cashing out and selling his shares to Alice.

In the meantime he'd be living off his stock investments. So, Charlotte couldn't believe that he'd left his computer out like that. Green's entire life was inside that IBM Think Pad. Most importantly, his carefully worked out system of

technical analysis. He'd been making an average thirty percent return on his investments since February. So far 1996 was the most bullish market in history.

"Green!" Charlotte reached for the door to shut it. "I can't believe you've left your computer out like this. What happened to the paranoid Jew I fell in love with?" This was going to be her first purposeful action on the trip so she wanted to give it a good slam.

Motel 6

June 5, 3 p.m.

For the first day after the accident, Charlotte wasn't allowed to lie down. Dr Evans, the ophthalmologist, told her that the blood in the front chamber of her eye had to settle before he would have an idea of how bad it was. Now her sight is back, and her eye is okay, but if anything happens to cause the front chamber to start bleeding again, the pressure in the eye will go up and then, according to Dr. Evans, she'll have "a dangerous situation." So Charlotte is not allowed to read for five days, or to do anything strenuous.

On their second day at Motel 6, Charlotte took all the books she was going to review while she was on the trip and dumped them in the garbage bin in the back alley behind their room. She told Green it was so she wouldn't be tempted to disobey Dr. Evans' instructions. But Dr. Evans has given her medication to keep her pupil dilated, which makes her vision blurry. So, she can't read anyway.

At this morning's appointment Dr. Evans gave her permission to walk around. Charlotte and Green went shopping for stuff for the trip: a cooler, a couple of disposable cameras, sunglasses, a giant tub of peanut butter, a gasoline camping burner, boxing gloves and a punching bag for Green. He's gained a lot of weight since they started going out ten months ago, and he wants to get in shape.

It was fun shopping for the punching bag with her black eye. Charlotte took her eye patch off to freak the clerks at the sportstore. When they got back to the motel, Green took a picture of her outside with the punching gloves on, next to the bag.

Now, she's watching *Montel*. They don't get this in Montreal so she's never seen Montel Williams before. So far he seems like a cross between Geraldo Rivera and Monty Hall. He's mediating a fight between a teenage girl, Laura, and a teenage boy, Chuck, who've recently broken up. Laura refuses to give Chuck back his leather jacket.

"Laura, what would it take for you to give this jacket back to Chuck?" says Montel. "What if I were to give you...." Montel pauses to take a billfold from his pocket. "How about one..." the audience, used to this ritual, starts to count with him. "TWO.... How about THREE hundred dollars? Would that be enough?"

Laura looks like she's thinking about it, but then shakes her head. "It's not how much it costs. It's the principle. He gave it to me."

"Well what about you Chuck?" says Montel. "Charisse, why don't you come out here and show my friend Chuck here something?" Charisse, a tall, mulatto model, emerges carrying a men's leather jacket with blouson sleeves that are obviously much more Montel's style than Chuck's. "C'mon Chuck, try this on."

Chuck hesitates, caught between not wanting to disappoint Charisse, and not wanting her to see him in the dweebie jacket. He lets Charisse put the jacket on him.

"What do you think Chuck?" says Montel.

"I don't know. I can't see myself."

"Well, what do you think Charisse?"

"It's fine." Charisse is trying to sound a lot more ghetto than she actually is.

"And Chuck, even if you don't like it, This jacket is worth \$675, which is a lot more than your jacket. You can just sell it and buy another one if you want."

"Okay." Chuck doesn't look too thrilled with his decision, but nowhere near as unthrilled as Laura.

Charlotte's eye is beginning to throb. "Green? Can you pass me my bottle of Percodans?"

Green looks up from his computer. The modem screeches as he downloads that day's stock prices. "Didn't you just take one?"

"Ya, but I'm not going to live through a week of American talk shows. If I kill myself now, you can head out without me. Things will be better this way."

"No, they won't. You have a black eye. People will blame me. You can't have any more Percs. Anyway, we're supposed to share them."

"But it's my prescription."

"Love means never having to say mine."

"I'm going to remember you said that. What's happened to you? Three months ago love was just the mind trying to trick men into having children."

"I missed you. I changed. Now, I have to work on my system if I'm going to continue to support you in the style you've become accustomed to. So, take a nap or something."

Charlotte watches Green for a moment. Hunched over his keyboard he looks like an information age goblin. She sighs, turns off the T.V and closes her eyes. Her mind drifts back to their apartment in Montreal. Her memory replays the phone conversation she had with her father just before she left.

"I just called because I thought of something from my experience that might be good for you to know." Charlotte's father never calls just to talk, so she figures this may be important.

"You know, Charlotte. When you haven't seen someone for a while you get this brief honeymoon period. Then all the old problems start to come back, but because of the honeymoon period they seem even worse than before. It's a rough time, but try and ride that period out."

Charlotte compares this to the advice her mother gave her at the Dorval airport:

"Honey, I'm not saying things aren't going to work out with you and Green. I just want you to know that if anything happens and you need to get home, we'll just send you the money, no questions asked."

"Thanks" says Charlotte, "but why wouldn't I want to answer your questions?"

"Because you might not have the answers right away. Listen, like I said this has nothing to do with you and Green. I don't know much about your relationship. It's just that.... well I wasn't going to tell you this, but I was engaged to someone once."

"Ya I know, the doctor. You've mentioned that."

"Did I? Actually, he was a famous criminal psychiatrist. But that's neither here nor there. The important thing is that we set out on a trip together and it's funny but I knew there were problems in the relationship. For some reason they never really came out fully until just after we started travelling together. I decided to come home almost right away, which leads me to the next piece of advice. Make absolutely sure, if you do come home, that you take the right passport. I had to cry my way all the way through Eastern Europe, trying to explain why I wasn't a six-foot-four blond man. Anyway, the point is, two months later I met your father, so don't be afraid to come home."

Charlotte is surprised by this advice. She's always believed her mother had a lot of regrets about not marrying "The Doctor." In fact Charlotte once told her psychiatrist, Dr. Guanita, that she believed her mother's general air of unhappiness was probably related to that failed relationship. Maybe her mother was just repressing this at the airport because she felt guilty that Charlotte was leaving, because maybe if her mother had had somebody around like Charlotte's father to give her advice, Charlotte would never have been born.

Love seems like an especially random force to Charlotte these days, which is one of the reasons she appreciates the fact that Green doesn't really believe in it.

"What are you thinking about?" Green has finished downloading his stock information.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Stupid Montel Williams." She doesn't want to tell him she's thinking about her parents.

"Still?!"

"You're right, I should stop obsessing about it. It's not our problem that America is so fucked up."

"Is there anything else on TV?"

"Can we not watch TV for a while? I'm sick of it"

"That's not my fault. You're the one who fucked up your eye."

"It wasn't my fault. You're the one who left the door wide open and attached it with that dangerous bungee chord. I was only trying to save your computer."

"You didn't have to close the door. You were right there. Nobody was going to steal it in front of you. Anyway you should have felt the resistance."

"It's a huge metal bus door. I thought it was just rusty hinges or something."

"But you still didn't have to close the door."

"I thought I was doing something useful."

"Well, what you think is useful isn't important. It's results that count in this world, babe. Not intentions."

"People make mistakes."

"Oh, fine then. So I just won't say anything until you wreck your other eye, next week." Green lights a cigarette. "I'm only mad at you because I care, you know."

"Thanks. Let's talk about something else, okay?"

"Why can't we just watch television?"

"Because I'm bored of television. Let's talk about your billion dollar plan."

"What billion dollar plan?" Green says suspiciously, as though Charlotte has come upon this information by illicit ways.

"You know, the billion dollar plan, you mentioned after you picked me up at the airport. In the hotel room, you said you had a billion-dollar idea, and a million-dollar idea. But that we might have to move to Silicone valley."

"I said that?" Green has a lousy memory for just about everything except columns of numbers that are blurs to Charlotte. He reminds her a lot of her mother, a lawyer who can remember arcane legislation, but spends fifteen minutes a day looking for her wallet. Charlotte wonders if they both have some kind of attention deficit disorder.

"Yes. You said that. So tell me about both of them."

"Well, the billion dollar one is Internet long distance telephoning."

"That sounds like something someone's probably thought of already."

"I know. But if we start right away we can get ahead of the big telephone companies, and make a niche in the market"

"You want to start right away? What about our trip?"

"Okay then, let's talk about the million dollar plan. It's more fun anyway."

"Oh ya?"

"It's Internet television. I'm going to call it NTV. As in NetTV.

"NTV is the name of the state television network in Russia."

"You've always got to come up with the glitch, eh?"

"Right. Like I invented Russia to fuck up your plans."

"No. But you're not very supportive sometimes."

"It's a great idea, Green. I really mean it. I would love to work with you on this. And anyway the average American knows dick about Russia. It'll be our little secret."

"You think you'd like to work on this?"

"Sure, my father's a television producer. It's in my blood."

"But we're not going to be doing CBC sort of stuff. The CBC is Them. We're doing stuff for The People. "

Green divides the world into two categories: The People and Them. The only exception to these categories is himself. Charlotte is, according to Green, irredeemably Them.

"Would this mean I get to become one of The People."

"Sorry. You're purebred Them. But there'll be hope for your future generations." Green stubs out his cigarette. "So let's watch TV"

"But I'm sick of TV"

"Well, Charlotte. If you're going to start caring about The People you better start watching television because that's what The People do."

"Fine. But Green, I just thought of something."

"What?"

"This NTV thing. It's going to be a lot of work."

"Ya, I know. That's why it's important for us to take a long vacation first."

-----Original Message-----

From: Charlotte [SMTP: green@pobox.com]
Sent: Friday, June 07, 1996 19:50
To: jonathon@babylon.montreal.ca
Subject: RE:Sorry

It's okay. I'm sorry too that things were so tense before I left. It's just the last thing you want to hear from your brother the day before you get on the plane is that he thinks your boyfriend's a creep and that you're going to get hurt.

Although you were sort of right. I did get hurt. But it wasn't Green's fault. I talked to Mum and Dad on the phone on Monday so I'm guessing they told you what happened. Actually, Green's been really sweet through all of this, insisting on going to all my doctor appointments with me, taking care of me and keeping me entertained.

Now, don't start accusing me again of thinking Green is some kind of Prince Charming whisking me away to a better life. I know that sweetness is not one of his core character traits.

But day one was really fun. It was still the last day of the A. A. N. conference so I got to meet some pretty interesting people without having to go to any of those loser workshops. We went out for dinner with the managing editors of *The Boston Phoenix*, *The Chicago New Times*, and some people from New Orleans and Seattle who were pretty cool.

They all love Green. Corporations own most of the weeklies now. I didn't know this but *The Sun* is about one of the only alternative weeklies left in North America still owned by independent publishers. Everyone thinks of Green as like the last of the freaks.

Then just as we we're setting out the next day, disaster struck. But the worst thing wasn't getting hit in the eye. Surprisingly that didn't hurt at all. (Although it hurt like hell after). The worst thing was that for a millisecond I was almost happy I was blind. I hadn't realized how fried my mind has become from reading so many books over the last three years. There's no way I can remember them all, but I estimated this week that I've probably read close to two hundred books since I started that column.

I totally understand now why Dorothy Parker moved to LA after she got tired of doing "The Constant Reader" for *The New Yorker*. Massive weekly doses of the search for Truth, Art and Beauty are enough to make you really notice the finer points of plot construction in Beverly Hills 90210.

I'm not getting any smarter. I'm getting shallower and more cynical every week I keep reading. It's awful. Just before I left I tried to read this new Anne Marie Macdonald novel. I just sat there for hours making deals like: if she introduces another minority character by the end of the next chapter, I can go out for a beer; If she's disabled, I can have two beers; If she's a victim of childhood sexual abuse, I can kill myself.

Maybe this is Anne Marie Macdonald's fault. Maybe I should write a review called *Fall on Your Cliches*. But *The Sun* doesn't have enough

space to print the six months of sanctimonious letters they'll get about me. And maybe it's not her fault. Maybe I'm just becoming a jaded heart Liberal.

I read somewhere once that people who read too much are like people who fuck too much. And considering I get paid for reading, I'm feeling like a dried up whore. Except whores make much more money. You know that great line in *Dog Day Afternoon*? When Al Pacino says "Hey. I like being kissed when I'm getting fucked." Well, maybe going out with Green is my way of saying "Hey, I like being fucked when I'm getting fucked."

Okay I know I'm getting really crude. I guess, the problem is I don't know how to do anything else except read. So, Green at least is a temporary distraction until I figure out what to do. I know that's not very romantic but that's how it is. Maybe I was getting all starry eyed before I left to deny the true depth of my nascent cynicism.

Anytime you want to send me tons of money to get me out of this predicament, fine. In the meantime I've decided to stop reading indefinitely.

Since I'm not reading anymore, I'll probably be sending you really long letters. I'm not going to have much else to do with my mind. But I'm going to have to stop here because the doctors don't want me to read or write too much this week. This afternoon my doctor said we could leave.

This is good because Green and I have developed pretty bad cabin fever and he's acting like a restless two-year-old.

Today the Freeman from Montana released a woman and her child from their compound. It's a big deal here because she's from Salt Lake City. Having gotten my release orders today, I feel something of a bond with her. Hopefully I'll be heading out tomorrow with El Niño (Spanish for child. The only thing I'm letting myself read right now is a Spanish/English dictionary. Did you know that Utah was once part of Mexico? Wow, they sure got rid of everyone who wasn't white.)

-----Original Message-----

From: Charlotte [SMTP: green@pobox.com]
Sent: Wednesday, June 19, 1996 19:52
To: jonathon@babylon.montreal.ca
Subject: RE:Where Are you?

Congratulations on getting that role. I've always thought you and Ethan Hawke looked a lot alike so it makes sense they'd choose you to play his younger brother. I can't believe you get killed in the first ten minutes. That's so cool.

Don't worry. I'm still alive. I know I said I was going to write you all these letters. But I've been really busy appreciating my sight.

Southern Utah was unbelievable. It amazes me that people don't talk more about it. It's like another planet there. It's at the connection between the four major geological plates so there's these weird explosions

of geography. Snow capped mountains next to hell-coloured canyons, and otherworldly salt flats. It's spring now and the mixture of colours is just bizarre. Blood orange rock and Blue Everglades growing in pink and purple clay. I can see why all the fundamentalists moved here. It looks like some kind of creative geography battle between Heaven and Hell.

We spent a few days in Bryce Canyon. It's this infinite horizon of rock formations that look like gigantic petrified souls, due to the way the ice erodes them in the winter and bakes them in the summer. Imagine 10,000 of these things three or four feet away from each other in an area that's about ten square miles. And then imagine me and Green lost for an entire day in ninety-degree heat trying to find our way back.

The next day we went to Zion National Park, which was beautiful in a different way. Deer and lizard frolic together in the campground next to chocolate coloured mountains. At night we listened to short-wave radio and caught five different languages under a clear starry sky. It was a perfect moment. The whole reason you travel.

But the next morning Green went into one of his depressions. This is the first time both of us have been anywhere without our psychiatrists. Green's supposed to be e-mailing his. But I don't think he is. Did I tell you that mine moved to California the month before I left? She said that I could probably manage the trip on my own, but that she had a feeling she might be seeing me again some day. What a weird thing to say.

Dealing with Green's depression is rough. He calls it the big blanket of sadness, and it usually paralyzes him for three days. But from the outside it looks like the big blanket of anger and I feel like he hates me. I reviewed a book this year by John Bentley Mays about his experience with depression. He says it comes upon you like a pack of black snarling dogs. Apparently, the thing the dogs despise more than anything is love. Love is the worst thing you can do to a depressed person, it just makes them more depressed. Mays seems to think the only solution is drugs. So, I just try and give Green a lot of space to work things out on his own.

I go for solitary walks, but it can get brutally lonely. I can't imagine what Green was like before he started taking anti-depressants. He says it used to last for weeks instead of days. My depression is so different. It's more like a constant low-grade kind of thing, like a pack of lethargic bloodhounds dragging behind me on their leashes. Dr. Guanato would never give me drugs. She said my problems were situational not genetic. Mostly due to Mum and Dad's lousy marriage, and partly due to my relationship block.

I wish Green could get some relationship block. (Trivial aside: it's exactly one century this year since Utah joined the United States, which they were only allowed to do after they outlawed polygamy.) I swear he spends more time talking to Alice on the phone long distance than he does with me, and answering e-mail from all his fucked up ex-girlfriends. I

know Alice is more his business partner than his ex-wife, but it still drives me a little crazy. Plus she's always telling him stuff that puts him in a bad mood, which he ends up taking out on me.

Like last week we had transmission problems in a town called Orderville. Green gets off the phone with Alice and he's fuming because she's having problems with John Evans. So he starts in on this "writers are retards" rant. And I point out that John Evans is a journalist not a writer. And he starts on about how they're all the same, always bitching about money, as though somehow they didn't choose to be writers or something. Always acting as though the world is exploiting them, instead of what they really are: a gang of parasites and sluts. And of course I freak out because I think he's trying to turn this into a personal attack. (Even though I haven't written a decent paragraph since I started going out with Green, so I don't know what makes me think I should be bonding with writers.)

Eventually we resolved this, as we do every couple of weeks, with sex. But because of his anti-depressants his will to resolve arguments is, unfortunately, not what it could be. Also he has some kind of complex about the size of his penis, which is actually quite average.

I always try to cheer him up by telling him it doesn't matter because he *is* such a big dick. And believe it or not, this actually works. Plus, when he starts going into rages it's a good sign, it means he's throwing off the blanket.

So things were actually cheery the next day as we started driving through Nevada, which is the opposite of Utah, but still strangely beautiful. I miss the colours, but there's something cool about the black, razor sharp mountains and the spacey desert.

Then just as we're booting along this long stretch of highway, the engine explodes. Not into fire at least, but into this huge mess of steam and oil. According to Rick, the mechanic at the Shell station in Caliente, where we have now been stuck for three days, one of the pistons popped. The entire engine is ruined and it's going to have to be rebuilt.

Caliente means hot in Spanish. But it's beyond hot. We had the hardest time getting a motel room because they've all been booked by the Reno fire department. It's so dry here that freak fires have been breaking out all over the place. And when they start, they are mega disaster zones. I've never seen fire trucks like this. They're like the fire army.

Military is everything in this state, next to gambling. Apparently all the military bases put together are the size of Connecticut. Yesterday I watched this train go by with what must have been hundreds of army tanks. It lasted half an hour. Exactly where they plan to use all these is beyond me.

No wonder all the anti-government terrorists are so pissed off about Waco. Here they are with this ultra sophisticated fire militia. And what does the government end up sending in? In the middle of the night,

under the cover of darkness, a tank. For no other purpose, it would seem, than to make tank sounds. It's pathetic.

We better get the engine replaced soon, because I'm going nuts in this crazy little highway town (although you'd love it because there are more dogs than people here. Pets seem to be the main topic of conversation. By the way, how are Smokey and Elvis? Give them each a big lick for me. And tell them the next time they get into the garbage that you're going to send them to Caliente.)

Once we've gotten the engine fixed, we're heading out to Rachel. It's supposed to be the capital of all things alien. It's right next to Area 51, which is the most highly classified military base in the U.S. People claim the military is hiding Extra Terrestrials there.

I'll let you know what we uncover. Unless things become too unbearable and I end up coming home next weekend. With Green, I never really know what's going to happen.

Caliente Café

June 20, 12 p.m.

Charlotte walks into the Caliente Café, escaping a big blanket of hot air. She sits down and opens her *Glamour* magazine on the pink and green plaid plastic tablecloth. They've been in Caliente for a week now, so she's decided not

to be too hard on herself, and is now allowed to read trash. She starts an article called "Five Ways To Know If Your Relationship Is Over."

#1 You're having the same fights over and over again. Charlotte thinks about this. No, she decides, their relationship is still a fresh hell.

#2 You're spending every minute of the day thinking of ways to please him. No, she'd given up trying to please Green
s ago.

#3 You've entirely given up thinking of ways to please him.

#4 One of you is making life plans that doesn't involve the other one. Since they have no concrete life plans at the moment, this isn't a problem.

#5 Everything he says irritates you. Nope. Green had stopped talking three days ago.

"How're you doing today?" Donna, the waitress, pours her a glass of water.

"Getting a bit antsy, to be honest with you"

"Rick's still got you guys waiting on that engine?"

"Yup. And those people at the Shady Motel are kind of getting on our backs to give up our room to the firemen."

"I used to work at the Shady. They're a creepy couple."

"I don't get the feeling they're too keen on us." Charlotte nervously rolls the corner of the page she'd been reading. "But I don't know what we're going to do if they kick us out. We can't sleep in the van. We'll bake to death. Is it always this hot?"

"Oh no. But the worst thing is it's always this dry." Donna pushes away a lock of frizzy brown hair, the colour of the dry mud mountains that surround Caliente. "I'm from Boston so I know how hard this is for you to get used to."

"So why'd you move here?" Charlotte tries to sound curious instead of appalled.

"Met a guy who lived here. So I came to visit, then I started to get to know people and like them. I'd never really known what it was like to live in a small community where everyone knew each other, and I started to like it, and whatever. Where's Saddam, by the way?"

The big joke in Caliente is how much Green looks like Saddam Hussein. Green doesn't think it's so funny since his father's family lived in Iraq for about 3,000 years, until they were kicked out of the cradle of civilization sometime in the 1950s.

"He's over at the bank, trying to talk the teller into lending him *The Wall Street Journal* for the afternoon. It's hard to get the bank to trust you when you look like Public Enemy number one. But it seems pretty impossible to get a newspaper in this town, period."

"Not too many people here read the papers. I don't ever. You've got to reserve them at the gas station a week ahead because they hate to over-order."

"So you're happy not knowing what's going on?"

"I like knowing what I get from TV. But there's too much thinking in newspapers. There's not much point thinking about shit you can't do anything about. And I sure as hell can't affect anything except my own life here, which is

why I like it, I guess. I feel like I let go of a lot of unnecessary concerns when I left the city. By the way do you want anything to eat or drink?"

"The regular, I guess."

"Coffee and a nacho salad?"

"Sounds good." Charlotte flips to the next article: "How to Grow Up".

This is an excerpt from a book called *Love, Pain, And The Whole Damn Thing: How To Reap The Rewards Of Adulthood And Find Real Happiness*.

The author, David Leibow, M.D., believes that most people go through what he calls a pre-adult crisis, sometime in their twenties, thirties or even forties. After this crisis they stop "acting like adults" and start "feeling like adults." At this point they give up their dreams of happiness and replace them with "real happiness." But some people never go through this crisis and go on merely acting like adults for the rest of their lives.

Charlotte stops at one paragraph. Out of instinctive habit she reaches for a pen in her jeans pocket and re-reads it. "...Children whose parents forced them to escape into reparative fantasies of greatness by depriving and criticizing them, or by expressing chronic discontent with their own lives, always find it difficult to modify their dreams in accordance with reality. They find it almost impossible to accept limits on their expectations, not because they've known great happiness, but because they haven't." Charlotte underlines the words "chronic discontent" and "almost impossible."

Green walks into the Café glaring the absence of *The Wall Street Journal*. He throws down a copy of *Fortune* and sits down wordlessly.

"Tuna sandwich?" asks Donna with a smile that says I'm not going to ask you how you are.

Green nods.

"Something to drink?"

Green shakes his head as his fingers begin to tap a syncopated tune of heavily condensed rage. "Where's Peg?" Peg owns the Café and usually sits in the corner near the kitchen playing backgammon with her paraplegic husband, Ron.

"Her and Ron have gone to Reno for a few days to visit her daughter," says Donna.

"So when's she going to get back? I have to talk to her about buying the Café".

"You're going to buy it?" says Donna.

"Sure why not. I was talking to her a couple of days ago, and she says she wants to sell it. Her price is fair. You've got a good regular clientele...." Green points his chin towards a guy sitting in the corner, reading a Louis L'Amour paperback. "And you've got the highway out in front. We're never going to leave. It's fate that brought us here. I can feel it. Plus Charlotte's a great cook and she loves it here. "

Charlotte is happy that Green has started talking again, but she hates it when he pulls this kind of shit. She chooses a Bailey's Irish Cream from an assortment of flavored non-dairy creamers that are preferable to the barely drinkable brown coloured water in front of her. As she peels off the paper foil

top, she tries to throw Green a carefully coded dirty look that won't embarrass Donna. She can't blow his joke at the risk of exposing his rudeness, so now she's going to have to play along.

"It's a good town to raise kids," says Donna.

"And dogs," says Green.

"Oh you've noticed the dogs." Donna laughs.

"Charlotte did. She loves dogs."

"Jim!" Donna yells at the Louis L'Amour reader, "how many dog licenses did you issue this year?"

"Five hundred and forty-three," Jim replies without looking up.

"And how many people in Caliente?"

"I dunno. Probably about five hundred and forty-four."

"What ? Does that make me the only person who doesn't own a dog?"

"No, honey. Some people own two of them, which means that there are actually more than a few puppy-hating freaks like you in this town."

"Man...." Donna rolls her eyes. "It's the only fucking thing I hate about this place. Yards of yapping creatures with nothing better to do than bark their furry little asses off."

"Well, it's a good place for them" says Green. " All this dry mud for them to piss on. Lots of strangers coming in every week for them to snarl at. These dogs are important citizens. They protect The People. So Charlotte, what kind of dog do you want to get to protect you while I'm away?"

"While you're away?"

"I'll be taking the train to Vegas for long stretches while you're managing your Café. I figure I'm going to have to start some kind of venture there. We may not be able to just live off the profits of your restaurant."

"Then I guess a pit bull or two."

"Sorry, honey" says Jim, this time looking up at her from his book. "No pitbulls allowed. Too many kids."

"I guess we won't be staying here then. I'll need heavy protection if you're going to start venturing in Vegas."

"I'll buy you a gun. You'll be fine."

"Thanks. I'm glad that you're still including me in your life plans. And I hate to be bickering about this once again, but don't you think it's about time you found out what's happening with this mechanic?"

"No, I'm happy the way things are. But if it'll please you to leave, then you have my permission to find out what he's up to."

"Donna. Do you have any idea if this Rick guy is going to ever fix our engine? I appreciate the fact that he seems overworked, but it's been ten days now. "

"Overworked talking." Donna rolls her eyes again. "Rick's just basically the worst procrastinator in the world."

"So what are we going to do? I mean we keep going in there and he keeps telling us manyana. I can't blow-up at the guy because I don't want him to hate us and do a shitty job on our engine."

"Don't worry about that," says Donna. "Once he does it, he'll do it perfectly. Rick's the best."

"If he does it," interjects Jim. "I don't want to scare you kids. But I heard a rumour that Rick's in the process of bailing town. I live down the street and his wife's been moving furniture into a van all morning."

"So why would he keep us here all week telling us he was going to do the engine? There's another garage just down the street."

"God knows," says Donna. "He's a nice guy, but he's always been weird, you know. He just lives in some kind of fantasy world."

-----Original Message-----

From: Charlotte [SMTP: green@pobox.com]
Sent: Wednesday, June 26 , 1996 15:35
To: Jonathon@babylon.montreal.ca
Subject: fresh hell

Where was I the last time I wrote to you? Stuck in a shitty little town in Nevada waiting for Rick the mechanic to fix our engine. That was what--five days ago? Well we've made some progress. Yesterday Rick finished building our new engine, and now we're sitting in a much littler and in many ways shittier town in Nevada roughly eighty miles from Caliente.

Turns out Rick never had any intention of re-building the engine. The whole time he was telling us tomorrow, he was actually organizing his family (a wife, three kids, two dogs, and a five-foot Iguana) for a midnight move to Reno. Luckily, I heard a rumour about this the day they were going to leave. I walked around Caliente until I found out where he lived, knocked on his door and cried until he agreed to do the engine. There's no place for pride or recrimination in hell.

The whole job really should have taken him a day, but it ended up taking three, because Rick's a compulsive talker and Green refused to let him out of his sight until he finished the job. This meant Rick explained the reason for every single task involved in rebuilding an engine, and Green got a free mechanics course out of the ordeal. (Well I guess not

free considering the hourly rate Rick was charging him.) But, the good news is that we have a brand new engine and we're rolling.

The good news is also that we didn't break down anywhere near Rachel, where we currently are, watching for aliens. There is nothing, and I mean NOTHING out here. We drove seventy miles not seeing a house or a soul, and passed only two cars.

Finally we turned on to a stretch of highway marked with official state highway signs announcing it as "The Extra Terrestrial Highway". I swear I'm not making this up. Imagine the kind of sign that might warn you about moose or deer or rocks. Except this one has a graphic of a space ship. I'm convinced now that UFOs will someday become a standard tourist symbol in Nevada, like picnic tables and restrooms are in normal parts of the world. God knows, there's not much else here. This part of Nevada is incredibly eerie.

About ten miles after that sign, we drove right by Rachel thinking it was just a trailer park. In fact it is a trailer park. Probably the only trailer park in the U.S. that is marked on the map as a town, since there's nothing else to mark here. Rachel, Nevada, pop. 125.

The only actual houses are a convenience store and "The Little Ale Inn", a restaurant with a couple of rooms for rent, and a sign that reads "Earthlings Welcome."

In *The Guide To Area 51*, a self-published pamphlet by a guy named Glenn Campbell, which we picked up in Caliente, it says that

Rachel has been here for decades. Even before they set up the base sometime in the 1950s the town was near a mine that dried up. Still, there's a weird feeling of impermanence. As though this were some kind of travelling circus. Except the circus arrives everyday in the form of tourists, journalists and conspiracy cranks.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the trailers, just outside the A le Inn there's a very big, very permanent looking monument. It was put here a couple of months ago by Paramount Pictures as a publicity stunt for its summer blockbuster, Independence Day, part of which is supposed to take place inside Area 51. The monument contains a time capsule to be opened fifty years from the day it was placed there, which would be April 21, 2046.

The Little A le Inn itself has the atmosphere of a well-lit cafeteria. Somehow I'd expected it to be more kitschy. Then, Shirley our waitress shows up. She's a time capsule in her own right. She's wearing a beehive wig that she must have bought when she was a teenager. She approaches you with the same stunned terrified look you see in mug shots (which I learned in a bar in Caliente is due to the intensity of the flash of police cameras.)

Green starts to chat her up. Turns out that Pat and Bob Travis who own the Inn are out of town. I'm kind of relieved because the bar is covered with bumper stickers blasting Jewish World Wide conspiracies, and advertising Turner Diary militia retreats. Walking in here with Green,

who's looking these days like Saddam Hussein's long lost hippie twin, might have been somewhat uncomfortable with the ultra right wing owners of the Inn. I'm still a little sensitive about the way we were treated by the motel owners in Caliente.

Shirley tells us we just missed the Parisien film crew who were here this morning. I'm sad about this. I kind of miss French. But at least the aliens haven't left. She claims they've been here since 1950, when they signed a truce with Eisenhower. They've been hanging out in Area 51 ever since. They usually come out on Wednesday nights, which is tonight. But we've arrived on a rare really cloudy day, so we probably won't see them.

Shirley tells us the best thing on the menu is the Alien burger with top secret sauce. Then she points us to a bookcase in the corner full of ET magazines, stuff about Roswell and alien theory classics, like Chariots of the Gods. I go over and browse through and notice that there's a different guide to Area 51 than Glenn Campbell's. This one looks very similar but is by a guy named Chuck Clark and seems to be much more pro-alien. When Shirley arrives with our alien burgers, I ask her why they don't have Campbell's book, but this scares her off. She says she gets in trouble if she talks too much.

After we eat, Green buys a bunch of alien merch for the van: an alien head dashboard magnet, a mock security pass for Area 51, an Area 51 baseball cap, a T-shirt with an alien head that says "Face the Future",

and a bumper sticker to tell everyone we've driven the Extra Terrestrial Highway.

As we're leaving to go check out the Area 51 Research Center, which is a trailer on the other side of the parking lot, these two frat house looking guys walk in. They have that same look on their faces that we probably had when we walked in, a kind of sneering curiosity about the place. I wonder what it must be like to work or live here and see that "Hi. We're here to see the freaks" look almost everyday of your life.

At the Area 51 Research Center, a blond girl with bad skin, but a pleasant non-intrusive manner, who introduces herself as Lucy, greets us. She points us towards the literature and then goes back to netsurfing. The library here, which also sells books, is the opposite of the Little A le Inn. This is obviously the alien de-bunking center.

When Green asks Lucy whether she's seen any UFOs, she rolls her eyes. "No I've never seen one. I think all of these sightings are crap. They test a lot of planes here and people mistake them for UFOs. In fact the Stealth bomber and the U2 were developed here. At night the Stealth kind of looks like a flying saucer. You can read all about it in my boss's book over there." She points to a pile of Glenn Campbell manuals.

Turns out Campbell has moved to Vegas for a while, but she communicates with him by internet.

"How come they don't have his manual at the Little A le Inn" I ask her.

"He's pretty much *persona non grata* in this town"

"Because he doesn't believe in aliens?" Green asks.

"No because of all this Paramount Pictures and Extra Terrestrial Highway bullshit."

Turns out a couple of months ago Hollywood and the State of Nevada put their heads together and cooked up this "Extra Terrestrial Highway" publicity campaign. They rolled in the tents and brought in the ET (as in Entertainment Tonight) cameras, and had a huge party, with Jeff Goldblum, et al. And to be extra crass they didn't invite any of the residents of Rachel, except the Travises.

"So Glenn's upset about not being invited to the party?" Green asks.

"No, he doesn't give a fuck about the party. It's the whole concept of the highway and the way the government went about it without any public consultation or anything. He's been trying to campaign to get them to take down the signs until he's able to present his side of the case for why it's so dangerous."

At first I think she's just being left wing cranky. I mean what's the problem with a highway sign with a few flying saucers right? But she actually makes a pretty strong case. The twenty six-mile border of the secret base is badly marked. There's no fence, just some signs about a 100 meters apart, warning that it's "unlawful to enter without permission",

that "trespassers may be subject to one year in prison and a \$5000 fine" and that "the use of deadly force is authorized."

If you wander into the base innocently, or idiotically, which tourists sometimes do, you are immediately spotted by radar. Huge black military helicopters arrive packed with gigantic unmarked excessively armed military police. After they've subjected you to a rough search, at the very least, they seize your camera and have been known to impound the occasional car. Then they call in the Sheriff to arrest you, and fine you usually something like \$600. And the beauty of this is you can't appeal to any one to get your property back because the government refuses to acknowledge that Area 51 even exists.

Not exactly a great trip for the kids, unless you're anti-government terrorists trying to traumatize your children into early government paranoia. In which case this place is better than Disneyland.

But Lucy says trying to get the Nevada government to account for anything is completely impossible. The whole State is just one big scam she claims. Apparently she worked in the Area 51 base for a summer. I asked her if she's seen anything suspicious.

"No, I worked in the cafeteria. What I saw was a whole bunch of people eating steak and lobster dinners for \$3. And hundreds of people flown in from Vegas everyday whose jobs are so classified the IRS can't track them down for taxes. They're probably developing some of the most expensive military equipment in the world there. And do you think any of

the profits or even income taxes of the people working there go to the State? Meanwhile Nevada is one of the poorest, most underdeveloped states in the U.S."

But most people in Rachel don't care, Lucy says. Except the Traveses who despise her and Campbell. Obviously the Traveses are ecstatic about the idea of station wagons of California tourists showing up every day at the Inn.

They've banned Lucy as well as Campbell from the Ale Inn, which she says doesn't bother her. She's happy enough net surfing and meeting the people who show up at the research center. Still, I can't imagine what it would be like to be shunned in a town that's already as isolated as Rachel. I get the feeling she has a big crush on Campbell, which is probably the only thing keeping her here.

Even though she doesn't believe in aliens she gives us a little map to the best place to look out for things that might look like UFOs. There used to be a good lookout point, but about a month ago the military decided to incorporate it into the unauthorized area. So now the closest place to go is a road that leads to some farmland next to the border of Area 51. That's where we are now, but we haven't seen anything except a dead cow, who looks like he's been here a few days and is mostly meat and maggots. Judging from the skulls and bones that litter this farm, this is the fate of a lot of cows here and I don't think aliens cause it, just bad water supply,.

Green's taking a nap now. I don't know how he does it. I'm dying of the heat, but he's snoring away. If I don't put a p.s. on this I guess you can assume we didn't see any UFOs. I imagine we'll be out of here tomorrow morning on our way to Vegas to meet some friend of Green's from LA. I don't think we will see any aliens. It looks like some kind of storm is setting in, which I guess will be good for stopping the fires.

After she finishes the letter, Charlotte looks over some of the articles Lucy has given them. She reads a profile of Glenn Campbell from a year ago in the *Sunday New York Times* magazine. The article portrays him as something of an anti-military eccentric. There is a picture of him in combat fatigues outside his Research Center.

But the most interesting story is about Bob Lazar, an aerospace engineer who claimed to have worked in Area 51. He was fired in 1989, after bringing some friends out to the base to watch a test flight of a flying saucer he claimed was housed in the secret base.

Lazar claims he'd been inside the saucer and that the chairs were much too small to have been made for humans, and that the interior design of the saucer was much too interesting to have been constructed by the military. There was no proof that Lazar had ever worked at Area 51, other than an IRS tax form that listed him under a corporate number that was highly classified. There was no record that he'd ever worked anywhere as an engineer, or studied

at any University. But Lazar claimed that the government had destroyed his past after he'd been fired.

There were various theories about Lazar, who apparently made a very normal and credible interview subject. The favorite one among alien debunkers, who didn't believe Lazar was a kook, was that he'd been set up by the government who wanted to leak an alien story as a distraction from the military experiments being performed.

Even though Charlotte wants to believe this theory, since she herself prefers to believe that the government was more likely to be fabricating alien stories than covering them up, she can't factor in why they would destroy his past. Wouldn't they want people to believe him?

Green prefers to believe that the government is hiding aliens. The two of them debated this before his nap.

"When you look up at that sky above a place like Zion. When you see all those billions of stars, how can you believe that we're the only life in this Universe? It's self-centered to think we're the only ones. And to think that just because we don't have the technology, or the money to create the technology, that other beings don't have it."

"Whether there are aliens or not isn't the problem" argued Charlotte. "Maybe there are, maybe there aren't, but the thing is we can't know. And if the government wants to hide this fact, good for them. They can hide it as long as they want, because frankly we spend more than enough money as it is protecting

ourselves from scary humans, let alone scary aliens. Anyway I don't believe there are aliens. I think the U.S. government is sending out false information."

"Why would they do that?"

"Just for the sake of sending out random distraction. To distract us from the fact that they're eating \$3 steak and lobster dinners. To distract us from how much Paramount Pictures made last year. Or to distract us from caring about the homeless, or the dying cows, or whatever."

"Ya, but aliens are more fun. And The People don't care about the homeless, or the cows."

Green loves conspiracies. Back in Montreal he was always going off on little business trips that he wouldn't tell her about. Once Charlotte even asked Alice whether it was likely he was having an affair. "No way" Alice said, "that wouldn't be Green."

Then another time Green's mother called from Tel Aviv. Charlotte had to explain that she didn't know where he was because he wanted it kept a secret. "Green" said Mrs. Saachi, splitting the double e with her Israeli accent "he's only keeping secret that he does nothing."

Now, as Green sleeps, Charlotte wonders why The People care so much about aliens and conspiracies. Is proving the existence of aliens or proving the non-existence of aliens some kind of reparative fantasy for Bob Lazar or Glen Campbell? Her mind keeps returning to that paragraph from *Glamour* . Do these men have some kind of Area 51 in their childhood. Some highly

classified spot in their parents' lives that generated the chronic discontent that makes it impossible for them to be happy with ordinary reality?

Green wakes up to find Charlotte writing in her journal. "What are you writing about?"

"What?" She pretends she didn't hear him because she doesn't feel like getting into another argument.

"You know what I said. Why do you always do that?" he asks with irritation.

"Do what?"

"Whenever you don't want to talk about something you pretend you didn't hear or understand what I said, so you can have time to make something up."

"I'm just writing about why I think The People care about aliens."

"So now you want to tell the truth."

"You wanted to know."

"Sure I wanted to know, but we'd moved on to the topic of why you always do that 'what?' trick, which you're avoiding by suddenly getting back the issue you were avoiding before."

"Green, stop fucking with my mind."

"Stop fucking with *your* mind?"

"So I think I could write an interesting story about Rachel."

"About what?"

" You know the way that the town has been ripped apart by this whole ET Highway thing and Paramount Pictures. I could probably sell this story to someone."

"Ya, so write it then."

"Well, we'd have to stay here a while. I'd probably have to get in touch with Campbell in Vegas. Maybe we'd have to wait for Pat and Bob to come back to the A le Inn."

"Sounds like work."

"And you don't want to work, right?"

"Not right now."

"All right, forget it."

"But then it's going to be my fault you didn't write the article."

"No. It's okay." Charlotte realizes she wouldn't know where to stop anyway. At what point would she know enough about these people's lives before she could prove her thesis? Could she stop until she knew about their parents, or their grandparents? Before she hit the graveyard of their dreams?

"I'll just use it in my book."

"What book?"

"The book I'm going to write while we're on our trip."

"I thought you were giving up books?"

"Reading books. I'm allowed to write them now because I have to have something to do while you sleep."

"Uh-huh." He frowned so deeply that dark clouds seemed to be moving in above his eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" Charlotte asks.

"What?"

"Fuck off. Really."

"Nothing. It's hot."

"No kidding."

"What do you want to do?"

"What is there to do except go back to the Little A le Inn."

Little A le Inn, 6 p.m.

While they have a few beer and an early dinner, Charlotte reads a couple of articles about Rachel. A small *National Enquirer* piece about how aliens had dropped by one afternoon for a burger, according to the Travises. And an article in *Mag Wheel*, an alternative music 'zine out of Detroit, which described the town pretty much as it is.

The barmaid is a daughter of the Travises and has absolutely no interest in aliens or talking about them. But later the author of the other guide to Rachel, Chuck Connors, drops by. Green asks him if he's seen any aliens.

"I saw a U.F.O back in 1993." Connors claims it was the "radical step manoeuvres" that convinced him it wasn't a Stealth Bomber. The way the object could pause in mid-air and shift direction without warning. "The army

doesn't have the technology yet to create anything like that," he says as though he's an authority.

"But do you think they maybe have the technology to create something that looked like it might be able to do that?" Charlotte asks. "You know as a distraction device, to convince people that there are UFO's when there actually aren't?"

But Chuck is so absorbed in a story that he seems to have recited many times, that her question just flies by him unanswered. "It emitted this kind of throbbing light. It looked like it was constantly about to explode but didn't."

Little A le Inn parking lot, 12 a.m.

Charlotte's eye is hurting. Dr. Evans told her that there would probably be a phantom pain that would recur for about a year after the injury. When she closes her eyes she sees the light that Chuck Connors described.

Charlotte and Green didn't bother to go and look for UFOs or Stealth bombers because the clouds were now so thick that the desert sky was starless. It is so dark outside, now that the A le Inn has closed down for the night, that Charlotte is able to go out and pee in the middle of the parking lot without any fear of being seen.

If Chuck isn't lying, she wonders, why would they have only tested the alien ship once? Chuck claims he's out there every night. Maybe they only tested it on cloudy nights like tonight when it couldn't be seen. Maybe it had

been out there right then hovering around taking pictures of her squatting in the parking lot.

It isn't worth thinking about, so her mind changes directions and settles on something Green has said earlier that night. Tonight is the first time they've had sex in the van. It was an awkward ordeal because each couch is really too narrow for more than one person. "Having sex in this bus is a real problem," Green said as though it wasn't the first time.

Charlotte decided not to bite on that comment for several reasons. First because her main priority at that moment was sex, not monogamy. Second, because she had the feeling that he'd said this on purpose. Like he wanted her to catch him so that he would have to "confess", knowing that she would probably forgive him since he wasn't usually unfaithful, and since she couldn't exactly storm out on their relationship tonight.

And third, because she hadn't been faithful herself. She'd asked Dr. Guanato whether she should tell Green about the ex-lover she'd slept with once while he was on one of his secret business trips, and once again while he was away. "I don't think it would be worth it," said Dr. Guanato. "This guy isn't a threat to him. So forget about it."

No, Charlotte decided, there was no way she could ask him about this, because then he would ask if she'd been faithful to him, and she is a really lousy liar. In fact he'd probably dropped that comment just to lure her into some kind of trap. The more she thought about it the more pre-emptive forgiveness always seemed the best strategy with Green.

June 25, 10:30 a.m.

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Charlotte wakes to the sound of hail hitting the roof of the van like shrapnel. She pulls aside the curtains to see small pebble-sized pieces of ice bouncing across the parking lot.

"Green! Wake up!" She shakes him.

"What...?!" he bellows angrily. Then as he starts to absorb the assault of sound on the roof he starts to look scared. "What's happening?"

"It's all over. There's a big mushroom cloud outside. Some kind of failed nuclear test. Little pieces of Stealth Bomber are falling from the sky. We'll be living like dogs now until the radiation poisoning sets in."

Charlotte has never seen Green jump out of bed. "What the fuck ..."

"Just kidding" Charlotte laughs. "It's a hail storm."

"Very funny. I almost had a fucking heart attack." He flops back into bed.

"What time is it?"

"How would I know?"

"Well, find out" he says irritably.

Charlotte takes the Think Pad out of its case, and waits for it to boot.

"Maybe we should buy a little clock for the car, Green. In a disaster it's good to have fast access to the time....It's ten-thirty five. "

"What should we do?"

"I dunno. Get some breakfast. Find out from the locals how long this weather is likely to last."

People are looking out the window of the Little A le Inn as Charlotte and Green bolt from the van. The hail is coming down at a velocity that hurts. As they open the door she hears the sound of laughter. But the group of locals continues to look through the window, seeming to barely notice Charlotte and Green as they come in.

"What do you think they were laughing at?" Green says as he shakes some of the hail out of his hair. Enough small pieces remain stuck in his dark curls to make him look like an Arabian abominable frost monster.

As they sit down, Shirley arrives, looking extra frightened. "Funny weather. Isn't it?" Charlotte is hoping to find out what everyone is laughing about.

"There's a military bus from Area 51 that's been parked outside for a while. It must have pulled over in the middle of the storm."

"Do you think they're transporting Extra Terrestrials?" Green asks. Charlotte throws him a dirty look. This habit of teasing waitresses is really starting to bother her.

"I don't think they'd bring them in." Shirley displays not a trace of irony.

Suddenly the group at the window starts to sit down. A minute later the door opens and two elite air force trainees enter. Both are freakishly tall, All-American handsome, probably in their twenties. One is black and one white. They walk towards the bar with the relaxed confidence of extra-humans and order coffee.

While the black trainee waits for the coffee , the white trainee walks over to the bookshelves and picks up the International ET magazine. As he flips through the pages Charlotte watches his expression. She hopes he might betray something with a contemptuous laugh, or a look of anxious concern. But he maintains an attitude of benign curiosity. He is seven feet of military innocence and serenity.

After the trainees leave, Green raises his eyebrows above a look that says "did you see that?"

"What?" says Charlotte.

"I didn't say anything"

"You didn't say anything because nothing just happened."

"He was interested." Green lights a cigarette.

"As far as I could see he was interested in that magazine as though he were one of The People, not one of Them." Charlotte takes the cigarette from his fingers, takes a drag, and exhales nonchalance. "He knows nothing. Which leads me to believe that there is still nothing threatening this planet--from without at least."

"That's what he wants us to think anyway."

"Boy they sure went to a lot of trouble to convince us though. Do you think they created that hailstorm as an excuse to send them out here? Or do they have instructions every time there's bad weather to go out and leak impenetrability?"

"You're no fun," he says taking back his cigarette.

"Sorry. So it looks like the hail has stopped. How much longer do you want to stick around here?"

"I have to take a shit, then we can leave. Here" he throws a twenty on the table "why don't you go pay?"

"Have you noticed how 'regular' you've become since we started travelling."

"There's an old Iraqi saying: You've got to eat. Because if you don't eat, you don't shit. And if you don't shit you die."

"Well you're so full of shit , you should live forever."

"That's the plan, babe." On his way to the bathroom he picks up the magazine the trainee was reading.

Charlotte pays for breakfast and with the change buys a cheap dashboard stick-on digital clock with the Face The Future slogan. She goes outside and is amazed at how every evidence of hail has dried up in such a short time. She is sitting in the driver's seat tearing the cardboard wrapper off the clock when Green comes out of the Inn.

"Whatcha got there?"

She shows him. "Where do you think we could find one that says Face The Present?"

"Vegas, baby. Fastest growing city in the U.S. Pass me that water. I have to feed the radiator."

As he's handing her back the empty container, she hands him the Extra Terrestrial Highway bumper sticker. "Might as well do our bit for Rachel tourism."

"Okay. Light me a smoke though."

"You just finished one."

"You die your way. I'll die mine. Anyway you smoked half of it."

"I did not. But when I live to see the aliens, I'll e-mail you in heaven."

"Fuck heaven. Nothing ever happens there. You know me. I'll be where the action is, plotting little conspiracies with my demon pals."

"No you won't. You'll be napping with your wormy pals. C'mon. Go, go, go. It's getting hot again."

Charlotte picks up the map, but just as she's opening it she hears Green yell "fuck" so loudly she has to get out and see what's happened. He is standing by the back tire exhaling smoke like a dragon.

"Look" he says pointing to a dribble of wetness on one of the back tires.

"Something from the engine must be leaking."

"What could it be? Rick checked everything a hundred times."

"That's what I thought."

Charlotte can sense Green about to plunge into furious silence. At a loss she looks around pathetically as though there might be a garage they haven't noticed, or one that has suddenly sprung up overnight. She feels useless and stupid. Then she notices that a large German Shepherd is pissing on the time capsule monument.

Las Vegas

MGM parking lot

June 26, 5:30 a.m.

The sky is what Frank Sinatra once called five-o'clock Vegas blue, a mix of dawn and marquee lights. The world is casting off a bearably cool night for a humid dew. In a few hours it will be another hot, dry day. But for now, things are fine.

Charlotte and Green are winding down after ten hours of gambling. They arrived in Vegas around noon, but had to spend an hour looking for a garage. The tire the dog had pissed on blew just as they were driving by Caesar's Palace. The first two garages they stop at on The Strip don't "do" flats.

After they get the tire fixed, Charlotte discovers that she loves gambling. Especially since she's playing with Green's money. She loves the way the odds decide your emotions for you. You pull the arm on the slot machine and a ringing bell and the jingle of quarters momentarily relieves two or three previous hits of disappointment.

They play for hours because Green has become obsessed with winning one of the cars that sits atop each island cluster of slot machines. First they lose fifty dollars going after a red Mustang, then another seventy-five going after a white BMW. No wonder the drinks are free. Charlotte knows what is propelling them is Green's image of himself in LA. Tomorrow night they will be

meeting his friend Alex, who is trying to talk Green into starting up a weekly there. Alex has reserved rooms for them at the Flamingo for the weekend.

But it's Thursday morning, so for now they are parked in the parking lot of the MGM, which was recommended to them by Ralf and Katarina Braun, a German psychiatrist couple they met in line for the buffet at Bally's.

The Brauns are taking a year off from their hospital positions in Berlin to travel across the U.S. in an RV. Even though they were half an hour from closing down the buffet at Bally's, tables were scarce, so the four of them agreed to share one.

During dinner Charlotte watched Green nervously, hoping he wasn't going to start quizzing Ralf and Katarina about their relationship. Next to his habit of teasing waitresses, this is the social habit of his that drives her the most crazy. Even though Green doesn't believe in love, he has an obsessive interest in other people's love lives. He's like an atheist who can't get through a conversation without bringing up God. But mostly they talked about the reunification of Germany.

At the moment, Green is fiddling with the short-wave radio trying to get something in English.

"They were nice," says Charlotte.

"The cars?

"No, the psychiatrists."

"Ya...for Germans."

Charlotte must avoid a discussion of The Germans. Talking about The Germans will inevitably lead to talking about The Jews. Talking about The Jews will lead to Green saying something along the lines of "and then we walked into the ovens like farm animals, but we'll never be sheep again". This will lead to his defense of the pre-emptive strike as Israeli military strategy. Charlotte will disagree with him and Green will say something like "talk to me about the Palestinians after your parents move to Tel Aviv." Charlotte has met Green's parents. She knows they are more liberal on this subject than Green. But this will mean nothing, because Green is convinced they are just being martyrs.

Green has managed to get Howard Stern on the short wave. A young black man is calling in from the Seven Eleven he works at to complain about how many times he's been held up in the last month. Stern is telling him he's a loser who'd be better off robbing Seven Elevens himself than standing behind a counter like some idiot target. His advice is to either get a real job or a gun.

"Green, have you ever wanted to have your own talk show?"

"Why?"

"You'd be good at it. You could probe into people's relationships and give them advice about love."

"There's no such thing as love. It's all just twisted dependency." Green stretches out on his bed, puts his arms behind his head and takes off his glasses.

"Then why did you ever bother telling me you loved me."

"Because that's what I feel...now. But it won't last beyond two years. It's all chemical. After two years people stay dependent on each other for maybe

another five or so years, and then it's over and then, if you're smart, you get out."

Charlotte can't figure out why she feels a sudden surge of affection for Green when he says stuff like this. He's always believed this, at least since she's known him. They fell in love arguing about love.

"What a bunch of crap," she says.

"Why do you have to be so fucking stupid. It was in *Time* magazine."

"Ya I know. The chemistry behind the seven year itch. You can't believe everything you read."

"Oh and what exactly is love. " He grins, while he scratches his balls and warms to the fight.

Charlotte notices that his boxer shorts are developing a hole. Green doesn't really seem to care. It's like he's starting to give up caring about himself the last few weeks. A feather from the pillow he's now clutching is stuck in his three-day-old beard.

"Eventually, love is more of a decision than a feeling. Once the initial thrill lessens, you have to be more intellectually motivated. It's like success in any area of life."

"Really and you know this from experience?"

"Maybe not."

"You read that somewhere, right."

"Probably. But I also know people in successful relationships. Hand me a cigarette?"

"Know people. And how often do you see these people?" Green reaches down into the mess of papers that fell when the tire blew. He finds a pack of Marlboros and throws her one.

"Regularly."

"Do you live with them?"

"Obviously not. I live with you in the MGM parking lot. Do you have a light?"

"So how do you know they're really happy?" Green throws a lighter at her.

"I can tell." While lighting her cigarette, Charlotte cocks her head to one side, trying to stretch her shoulder muscles a bit. She's stiff from sitting on the edge of her chair for so many hours at the slot machines.

"I see. So I should trust your instincts over *Time* magazine."

"Believe what you want, Green. But who's right is not the subject I raised. The original topic was whether you could be a good talk show host or not. And even though I don't agree with you, I think you have a fresh perspective to offer North America. Your show wouldn't be hate mongering or anything. It would just be not-love mongering. It would be a nice change from Dr. Laura."

"Ya I could tell people the sooner they have sex and move in together, the sooner they can get tired of each other and move on with their lives."

"And then the people who never listen to advice about love--which is everyone, or they wouldn't keep having to listen to advice shows--would do the

opposite of what you suggest. Then they would end up living deep and fulfilling lives. It's all about expectations really."

"What's that you're babbling about?" Howard Stern seems to be fading out. Green turns over on his stomach and fiddles with the short-wave trying to get another station.

"Maybe people need a good dose of cynicism to help them focus their beliefs."

"At least I have opinions."

"Lots of them"

"That's the problem with people these days they don't have enough opinions." After finding the BBC he stretches out again.

"Well I guess that's an opinion."

"What do you mean by that."

"You can't generalize about whether or not people today have opinions. Some people do, Some don't."

"See that's what I mean. That's not an opinion. You have no opinions. You always see both sides of the issue. You have no fucking stand on anything. "

"You're not taking a stand. You're making an overgeneralization."

"That's what a good talk show host does."

"A good radio talk show host these days just abuses people any way he can."

"It's just words."

"Sometimes words can hurt way worse than physical abuse."

"You and your P.C. crap. They're just words. They're just opinions. A mature person isn't hurt by words. And if they're hurt by words it's because somebody else made them too sensitive to words once. Probably by being too polite to them as children. People have to be able to function in the real world."

"So I guess your parents weren't too over-polite to you as a child?"

" My parents were weird."

"Did they verbally abuse you?" Charlotte leans her head on her hand. Mr. Saachi is so quiet, it's hard for her to imagine him ever abusing Green. But she knows that sometimes those men are the worst.

"My Dad did. But mostly he just ignored me or came up with weird punishments."

"Like what?"

"Like one Saturday morning me and my sister were too noisy and we woke him up. So my Dad stormed out of his bedroom and spanked us. Then he dragged us back into his bedroom and made us stand in the corner and watch him sleep for the next three hours."

Charlotte tries to imagine Green as a child watching his father sleep. The child part is easy. In many ways Green still looks like a child. Imagining him afraid of his father is harder. Green never seems afraid of anyone. "You're right that is weird. But I'm beginning to understand something about you."

"What?"

"Why you're so passive tyrannical."

"Passive tyrannical?" Green draws the two words out with a long deep satisfied giggle. This is Green's one true charm. His laugh. Charlotte figures he must have done a lot of LSD in his life to retain a sound this genuinely infantile. And there's something incredibly disarming about his glee.

"Clever." He giggles again. "You're smart sometimes. Passive tyrannical. We should have talked about that with Ralf and Katarina."

"What other weird things did your father do?"

"He used to punish us a lot in front of other people." Green seems to be losing some of his defensiveness as he starts to search his memory for the most memorable punishments. "Once, when we were on a family road trip, he got mad at my mother because she let my hair grow too long. He said I looked like a girl. He grabbed me in front of all these people and cut my hair, except he did a really bad job of cutting it. Neither of my parents would look at me for a week, until finally my mother got the guts to bring me to a barber. Then, actually, now that I'm remembering this stuff, he did something in Vegas once."

"What happened?"

"It's weird how I forgot about this. But he punished me at the Flamingo. Kids aren't allowed in the casino. But we didn't know that. So we came looking for him. When we found him he freaked out and spanked us in front of all these people playing slots."

"That's not so weird. It's kind of understandable. A casino is a pretty dangerous place for kids. You don't know what creeps could be hanging out

there. You could have had a lot worse shit happen to you than your Dad spanking you."

"Oh, so you're taking my Dad's side? He didn't have to do it in front of people."

"Well what about your real world theory? If people should be able to handle public abuse by talk show hosts they should be able to handle it by their parents right? Anyway now you're all grown up and you'll be staying at the Flamingo tomorrow night. You can exorcise the trauma, and I'll be there to share this recovery moment with you."

"Whatever" Green yawns. The sun is up and it's starting to get hot in the van. Green closes his eyes. "I'm going to go to sleep now. Don't wake me up tomorrow morning. I to be sharp for this meeting with Alex."

"Don't worry."

Caesar's Palace

June 28

12 a.m.

Alex is lucky. It bothers Charlotte because she doesn't believe in luck. She always breaks even and figures most people do in the end. But at the roulette tables that evening Alex wins five hundred dollars. Then as they're walking towards the bar at Caesar's he slips a quarter into a slot machine and money comes pouring out.

"I swear I'm not usually this lucky." He laughs with charming, but not believable self-deprecation.

Charlotte knows Green is impressed. Green believes in stuff like forces of fortune and misfortune. Charlotte used to. But she stopped about a year into psychotherapy. Dr. Guanato convinced her that this belief was just an expression of her sense of impotence. Still, Alex is starting to make her feel unlucky.

He is also beautiful. Half Korean, half black, he looks a bit like Tiger Woods. He has arrived with an anemic-looking girl named Lea, the film editor at the LA weekly Alex was managing editor of before it was bought by a corporation two months ago.

At the roulette table Lea developed a headache and went back to her room early. Alex seemed vaguely put off.

"So? Lea?" Green asks now as they sit down in the bar.

"She's the greatest. Really great." Alex motions the waiter. "Do you guys want champagne?"

"Sure...but how come she went back to her room?"

"I dunno, maybe she's pissed off. I should have paid more attention to her. You don't understand how much I wish I could fall in love with Lea. But I just don't go for the good women. There's something wrong with me."

"What kind of women do you go for?" Charlotte asks.

"Bitches. I like the ones that are mean to me. I don't know what it is but I can't seem to fall in love with a woman unless she's treating me like shit."

"I know what you mean," says Green.

"Really? Charlotte doesn't seem like that."

"She's not at all. But she's special. If it weren't for her I'd be going out with the fucked up women I usually go for."

Green is always much nicer to Charlotte in front of his friends than he is in private or in front of strangers. Some kind of ego thing that has nothing to do with her, but she isn't going to complain about it. She says: "you'll probably outgrow this masochistic phase, Alex. A lot of people go through that. But odds are you'll get over it."

"Odds aren't in my favor in the love department. I've been thinking about seeing some kind of therapist."

"Don't," says Green. " Maybe you'll get over the bad love thing, for a while, but they'll try and get you to give up gambling. And I need you gambling away in LA for me while I finish this trip."

"So you want to start the weekly?"

"I think so. We're going to need to settle down at some point. We can't keep globetrotting forever."

"You don't think you're going back to Montreal?"

"Never, it's a fucking black money hole now with all this separatism shit."

"You think Quebec is going to separate?"

"Of course they will."

"We don't know," Charlotte interjects. "You never know what's going to happen with Quebec."

"Well I'm not going to stick around to find out," says Green.

"I can't argue with you since I don't know enough," says Alex. " And anyway I want you in LA. So I've been thinking maybe we should call our weekly *Quake*. You know as in earthquake...shaking up LA....metaphorically."

"Quake." Green rolls the word with his seductive giggle. "What do you think, Charlotte?"

"Clever."

"Charlotte hates it"

"I didn't say that."

"I can tell. C'mon, tell Alex why you hate it."

"It just seems to be trying too hard."

"You may be right, actually. I'll think about it . It's just an idea. But I want to know something else from Charlotte. How does Green treat his writers?"

"Green thinks all writers are retards"

Green shoots her a piercing "shut the fuck up" look. Alex seems uncomfortable.

"Just kidding." She laughs lamely. "Champagne makes me bitchy, which isn't my usual disposition. See how bad I am at it. Obviously I can't complain, I'm getting a road trip out of him."

"Ya, I'm very committed to my writers," Green says, trying to sound nice, but she can tell he's still angry.

Alex stands up. "So, I think I'm going to go out and do some more gambling. Do you guys want to join me?"

"I think we better save some of our bad luck for tomorrow," says Green as he gets up to join him.

Green and Alex start walking towards the casino planning the best time to meet tomorrow. Just as Charlotte's getting up she notices that Alex's wallet is stuck behind the cushion in the chair he was sitting in. "Alex," she yells, as she retrieves it.

"Wow, Charlotte. I can't believe how lucky I am that you're here."

San Miguel D'Allende

-----Original Message-----

From: Charlotte [SMTP: green@pobox.com]
Sent: Thursday, July 18, 1996 09:50
To: jonathon@babylon.montreal.ca
Subject: RE: Where are you now?

I know it's been a while. I guess I only get the urge to write when things are bad. Sorry I'm so neurotic and self-absorbed. I'm trying to change, but it's hard. Especially right now when I'm going through a really bad case of culture shock. This is exacerbated by the fact that a few days ago most of what I brought on the trip was stolen.

Thieves threw a rock through the passenger window while we were out drinking with some Canadians we met.

It might have made things more complicated in the end, but if I had to do the trip again I would have brought a dog. One well trained, friendly but occasionally vicious guard dog type.

But if we had brought a dog, Green would have wanted a puppy. Green needs new things. I read once in the *Globe & Mail* about researchers who isolated what they called a novelty gene, which predisposed certain people more than others to the need for newness. Those people who had this gene, combined with a capacity to take risks, tended to rate high in success. People who had the gene, but weren't risk takers, tended to end up as alcoholics or drug addicts.

I can easily picture Green as either of those things, depending on what mood he's in. One minute we're fantasizing about all these cool projects we could start in LA: newspapers, TV Internet travel projects. The next, I'm convinced that he's just going to drop out of the world and become a bitter old flop. But when you live with these novelty types, you have to swat away these potential problems. And it's not hard because they certainly find enough new daily problems for you to deal with.

We've come a long way from Caliente, Nevada with its yards of spoiled, loved, yapping dogs. When we were driving through Arizona I started noticing these dog shrines along the highway. And then when we hit Mexico the dog shrines became people shrines. If anyone actually buries the dead dogs by the side of the highways new dead dogs will soon replace them. And even in the colonial towns, I've looked down at intersections to see what I thought was a soiled purple and red shirt, only to suddenly notice a paw or a nose peeking out from beneath it.

If there were Chihuahuas in Chihuahua I didn't see any. All I saw were wild dogs. Breedless wild dogs with what seemed to be the same personality housed inside these fur coloured skeletons. They didn't look vicious, so much as mad. But not an angry madness, it was something more like the glazed, irritating, but not dangerous look you sometimes meet in the functionally insane. Their eyes have the regular, dull gleam of senses constantly on the alert for a scrap of food or affection.

Oddly, for creatures whose eyes seem to be so constantly on alert, the dogs still do not seem to expect cars. There are many poor dogs, but not many old dogs in Mexico. The drivers usually make sure of that .

I feel like some spoiled North American grown up kid watching the violence of Saturday Morning cartoons come alive. But that's what the first week on the road in the developing world is like for us whose lives post-date the years in North America when dogs ran free. Maybe it's because we've seen so many TV images of human poverty that the dogs are more of a shock.

Not that the people aren't a shock. But they're harder to write about. I feel like we're driving back through history or something.

We spent the first day struggling with the reality that nobody in the Central Northern mountains of Mexico speaks English, not even customs. The central corridor, which starts from El Paso, is not, for some reason, very popular with tourists. I don't know why. Geographically it's awesome. The mountains are gorgeous, the weather is eternal spring. Obviously it's the socioeconomic reality, which is more than a bit depressing.

We crossed the border last Sunday, making the mistake of thinking Mexican customs would give us directions to the place where we could get our vehicle permit. But, *no habla Ingles*. So we figure okay, drag, we'll have to go back over the border and ask some one at U.S. customs if they know anything about this procedure.

I don't know why we didn't notice the line up of people to get into the States. We just thought they we're lined up to buy tacos from the merchants that had set themselves up next to the traffic jam.

Two kilometers and six hours later we're back in the U.S.A. We get the information we need. We set out again. Six days later it's looking like we may be going back there.

After four days of trying to grapple our way through this country with no knowledge of Spanish we finally meet some Canadians in a tiny colonial village called Guanajuato. We shouldn't have left the van unattended but we just wanted to get out and have some fun.

The next thing we knew we were really drunk and when we tried to take a cab back to the van, discovered that we didn't know how to tell the cab driver how to get there. The street we were looking for was a main street that twists through the city in four different directions. It's completely medieval.

We had no choice but to go to a hotel. When we finally found the van the next morning the window was smashed in. I don't know what's with these robbers. If you can believe it they leave Green's computer, the television, and the VCR. Instead they steal my clothes, my knapsack, my sleeping bag. All they left me was a book I broke down and bought in El Paso, a book on contemporary Mexican politics called *Bordering on Chaos*. (It's amazing by the way if you can find a copy. Okay I'm lying, I bought two books. I also bought David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

because it's 1,100 pages, and I figured I could claim to myself that I only read one novel. They didn't steal that, probably because it's too big.)

Unfortunately they did steal a couple of things of Green's: his passport and the vehicle permit.

Luckily there's a Canadian Consulate in San Miguel D'Allende, about ten miles away. Unluckily the woman at the Consulate is a moron. She tells us that the Canadian government won't replace Green's passport because he wasn't born in Canada and doesn't have his citizenship card. (His parents moved here when he was six.) She says that the best they can do is give us a letter that will get us over the borders back to Canada. This despite the fact that Green has photocopies of his passport.

Now we're waiting until the consulate in Mexico is open so that we can talk to somebody else. It's closed for some kind of holiday.

This morning while we were in a Café despairing, this guy shows up who recognizes the van. Apparently he's Alfred Pennington's brother (the guy who built the van.) John claims it was his idea to paint it silver. And since he knows what colour the van was before, I guess he's not some lying con man.

But I don't like him. He's a pervert, I can feel it. Still Green's impressed with him because he claims to be a really successful commercial photographer who's done ads for Nike, Bell Telephone, and most of the Canadian banks. Though at the moment he doesn't seem to have two cents to rub together. He says he's in early retirement now in

San Miguel, working on a second career as an art photographer. I don't know how much longer we're going to be here but I know he's not going to leave us alone.

July 20, 5 a.m.

Charlotte lies frozen as the flashlight shines through the window of the van. "Green?" she whispers loudly, but he continues to snore. Silently, she waits a minute until the light goes away. Maybe it's the police. The station is on the south side of the Zócalo where they are parked. Green has decided that from now on they're going to always park in the center of town, figuring since there would always be people around, robbers would be discouraged. This is fine for him because he can easily sleep through the laughter of the drunks who hang out in the square all night.

Charlotte hates Mexico. She's tired and scared and she wants to go home. But it isn't just the crime and the poverty and the dogs and the guns and everything that has happened to them since they crossed the border. It's something else that started to gnaw at her towards the end of dinner at John Pennington's this evening. She doesn't hate Mexico nearly as much as she hates the English North Americans in Mexico. It seems to Charlotte that every ex-pat they've met in San Miguel is in the grip of some kind of chronic contentment.

Tomorrow if things go okay they'll be out of San Miguel. Green has screamed his way on the phone to the right person at the Canadian Embassy in

Mexico. They will be sending his passport in a week to the consulate in Oaxaca, where Charlotte and Green are planning to be in a week.

But the Mexican bureaucrats in charge of re-issuing the vehicle permit have sent them back to the police three times, never satisfied with the report. When Charlotte asked the head clerk if he could write down what it was they required in the report, he looked at her coldly. "No, if we do that, the policia will say that you bribed us."

Thank God for Bruce, John's new roommate. Bruce once owned a small newspaper in Spain, so his Spanish is perfect. Somehow he managed to straighten things out. The new permit should be ready in the morning and then they will be heading to Mexico City, even though John claims the Mexico City police will probably rape Charlotte.

Charlotte is nervous, but she doesn't believe John's constant horror stories about what could happen to her on this trip, without an extra man along, any more than she believes he's one of the top three colour photographers in the world.

When they'd first arrived at Bruce and John's for dinner, her culture shock had subsided a bit. Bruce has a pretty little apartment. Like everything in San Miguel it's charming and cheap. Inside the apartment house is an indoor courtyard filled with geraniums and bougainvillea and interesting ironwork balconies.

The apartment itself is sparse, but clean and white. John and Bruce have only been living there a month. But Charlotte has the feeling that it is going to

remain bachelorish for a long time. Bruce is on the waiting list for a phone, which will probably take a year or two, but he doesn't seem to feel much need for one. He seems happily devoted to a penurious existence. But gradually Charlotte starts to notice that his face has the pink, waxy look of someone with a permanent smile.

The only decoration is Bruce's awful art. He's just started painting this year and the room has several madonnas with soulless green-tinged complexions. Bruce claims he's never been happier in his life, now that he's doing what he always wanted to do, painting. He's content to make no money at his art, but he doesn't seem so content with having no talent. It's difficult to get him to stop talking about Van Gogh. How no one saw his talent until after his death and how he made only 109 dollars during his lifetime.

Of course, near the end of dinner, Green turns the conversation towards love. They are sitting out on the back porch where they can see dusk descending the winding, narrow, stone streets. Looking at the town from above makes Charlotte feel less vulnerable.

"Bruce is my wife" says John, as he sucks up the last piece of spaghetti.

"I guess I am, which is a nice change since I've always been known primarily as a good husband."

"What happened to your wife?" Green asks.

"Wives. I don't know. I haven't talked to them for a few years, but I hope they're well."

"How many wives?"

"Only two."

"Only...?" scoffs John. "Two more than any one should have."

"No. No. I loved being married," says Bruce. "Especially the second time."

"So, what happened?"

"She was just too good for me, but I always knew that, so I just lived life one day at a time." Bruce begins to clear the plates from the table.

"Is that the secret to a good marriage?" asks Charlotte, as she gets up to help him.

"No, the secret to a good marriage is the woman," says Bruce without hesitation, as though he's said this before a few times.

"So they were both good women then?" asks Green.

"Well ... they were both good women but the second one was probably a better wife. The first one, Carmen, was beautiful, but Mexican women are difficult. Very dependent, very possessive and very, very jealous. European women are just better. More independent."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Barbara was wonderful. But I always knew she'd leave so I just decided to make her as happy as I could."

"And how'd you make her happy?"

"She was a writer. I helped her write. I built her a studio and sent her stuff out to the right people. She wrote six novels, one of them about me."

Bruce beams.

Green raises his eyebrows and gives Charlotte a look of mock significance.

"And she left you anyway?" Charlotte tries not to smile at Green.

"She was a free spirit. But that's what I loved about her. We never fought once during the whole relationship. Not once."

"That doesn't sound very healthy to me," says Charlotte, "it's hard to resolve conflicts if you don't fight. It's just going to build up."

That comment seems to dent his forehead a bit, but then Bruce smiles his concern away. "Do you want to see a picture of her?"

"Sure," says Green.

Bruce leaves for a moment and returns with a picture of a surprisingly rakish looking Bruce sitting at a table of extremely beautiful people. His wife is stunning. The others look like young jet setters. It's the kind of picture you might see in a Vanity Fair collage of seen-around-town people.

"Wow." Charlotte is surprised.

"We were very happy."

"Well, you were beautiful, anyway." Charlotte excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

Sitting on the can she wonders about Bruce. He strikes her as someone who will always be positive, but never really happy. Then as she pulls up her jeans she catches something out of the corner of her eye, a movement near the large curtainless open window. It's John peeping in at her.

"Sorry," he says, as though it's an accident.

When she walks out she throws him a dirty look. But he's busy laying out the portfolio he promised to show Green.

"First I'll show you the ads I've done. They're amazing. I was the best advertising photographer in Canada. I showed these to a woman the other day who wanted to commission me to do some ads for her hand-made jewelry and she made me close it half way through. 'You're too good. I'll never be able to afford you.' she says. She was right. Which is why I'm so fucking poor. Nobody can afford me in this town."

After he's shown them a few pieces Charlotte has to admit that he's not entirely full of shit. They're excellent.

"They were blown away by this one." He flips to a Bank of Commerce ad, a simple but brilliant portrait of a friendly, neighborly looking Chairman of the Board.

"This one's really tasty." He shows them a Bell Canada ad that looks like an Alex Colville painting.

Charlotte cringes. She could never call anything she created "tasty", not even a meal.

"Great composition," says Green.

"So what about your art?" asks Charlotte.

"We're getting to that now. This is my favorite." In the center of a stylized morphing of a desert scene stands a cactus with a latch in it. This makes it look like it might be at the gateway to something.

"I like this one too." A yellow building with a teal coloured window frame surrounding a window with bars on it.

"Nice....All the windows in the colonial cities have bars on them, eh?" says Green.

"Yes. This is another tasty one." A pair of male legs descends some blue and white tiled stairs in very slow motion in a way that makes it seem like there are ten pairs of legs.

"Those are very resonant legs." Charlotte tries to sound as snide as she possibly can.

"Okay that's enough," says Bruce. "It's time to watch the movie. Did you guys bring your VCR?"

Bruce wants to show them a movie he claims is a classic. It's called *The Emerald Forest* and is about a young boy who gets lost in the rain forest in Brazil. A tribe of Indians in South America adopts him and he ends up growing up amidst topless nubile teenage girls. When his parents eventually find him he doesn't want to return to civilization.

Charlotte falls asleep during the movie, so she doesn't find out how it ends. And now, even though the flashlight has not come back, she can't fall asleep. She looks out the window. The Zócalo is empty now and the sky is getting lighter, turning the colour of the pinkish stone of the cathedral.

Charlotte flops back down and looks over at Green.

Throughout the night he has managed to swaddle himself in a dark blue flannel sheet. All she can see of him is one foot and some hair. Somehow he manages to look newborn and newly dead at the same time.

Charlotte considers the temptation of retiring to a developing country to pursue one's artistic dreams. It wouldn't matter if you failed or not because no one would know who you were anyway. At the moment the idea sickens Charlotte, but who knows maybe in time it wouldn't seem so bad.

Suddenly, Charlotte hears singing. She leans up on her elbow and looks out the window again. A procession of women are coming out of the cathedral. Dressed in street clothes they begin to walk slowly around the town square singing beautifully, but quietly, so as not to wake the city.

Puerto Angel

July 28

Dear Jon,

Sorry I haven't answered your e-mail, but I've been busy loving Mexico. At first I thought it was the most fucked up place on Earth, but now that I'm used to it, its insanity is one of the things I love most about it. I can't get enough of Mexican newspapers. It's like a never-ending sordid soap opera of corruption. I won't get started on the Salinas brothers or I won't have space to write about anything else.

Hope my typing isn't too bad. I bought an old portable in Mexico City because Green was starting to get possessive about his computer. Plus it makes me feel very Hemingway.

It's hard though. I used to be a decent typist but I've become pretty computer dependent over the last decade.

But it's a good thing I bought this because here in Puerto Angel the electricity has been pretty iffy

since yesterday, when there was a bad storm. I met a nice university student who explained that every year or so there's this phenomenon called El Niño. If an unusually warm current suddenly enters the Pacific, it fucks up the weather patterns along the coast.

Puerto Angel always gets the worst of it because it's such a tiny bay. It's a shame because it's such a pretty little fishing village. Maybe El Niño is what's kept it from getting too touristy.

At any rate it certainly blew apart our relationship yesterday. We had a huge fight and I was very, very close to getting on a plane and coming back to Montreal.

It was our first year anniversary, which I date from the first time Green kissed me. Yesterday, while I was in a bitter cloud of rumination, before we made up, I did a lot of thinking about where I was this time last year in my life. I was lonely, but things were going okay. I had a job I liked, even if I didn't love it. I was writing, even if I didn't much like what I was writing. Then one day Green walks up to me in the office and says "let's get out of here".

I thought he meant let's get out of the offices of *The Sun*, like for a drink or something. We'd

always had an office flirtation since I'd started working there. But it turns out he meant let's get out of here, as in Montreal.

The next thing I knew we were planning it, even though I thought it was just a game. (I always thought it was up until I got on a plane nine months later. I can never take Green too seriously on anything he says.) Then twelve hours later we were sitting in the Second Cup on St. Laurent and it was getting on to dawn. So he walked me home along Duluth and as I was looking up at the cross all lit up in this electric blue sky, he kissed me.

The next day we started arguing about love and suddenly I didn't have a relationship block anymore, and a few months later I moved into his apartment.

Anyway, I digress. So yesterday we're sitting in this restaurant playing chess. It's more an informal grass hut really than a restaurant. Chickens and wild dogs run around your feet, but the fish soup is amazing. We bought the chess set in Mexico City.

Green's much, much better than I am because his father taught him how to play when he was a kid. But I managed to beat him once, last week, when we were staying outside a little commune of weavers in the

Oaxaca valley. The town was called Teotitlan de Valle and we found this quiet, safe place to camp. It was the first time we hadn't parked next to a town square, which means it was the first quiet evening we'd spent together in over a month. After I beat him, it got dark and you could see all these little villages hung on the mountains like Christmas lights.

But back to Puerto Angel. So, I'm winning this game that we're playing, but Green apparently has seen a vulnerability in my strategy and is three moves away from mating me (at least this is what he tells me after, since I obviously didn't recognize this at the time.)

Suddenly a huge gust of wind sweeps into the bay and knocks over most of the board. As we're picking up the pieces I start gloating about how I was winning anyway. And he starts trying to explain how he was going to mate me, and of course I say, "Sure you were", even though I believed him. Green wouldn't make something up just to win, especially since he's won the last twenty-five games.

The next thing I know he flies into this temper tantrum and starts screaming at me calling me a fucking bitch and telling me he can't live anymore

with my "twisted versions of reality." He was right, I was twisting reality, but now that's not the issue anymore. The issue is that he's humiliating me in front of all these people in the restaurant, which I think is less acceptable than my little barb about the chess game.

So in tears I storm out, and then the skies open up and it starts to pour, so he doesn't have any choice, he has to follow me back to the van. Then I tell him that unless he apologizes we're going to have to break up because I won't tolerate being abused in public. And he says fine where's the nearest airport (which he wouldn't know since I'm the one who does all the reading and planning and navigation for the trip, with no help from him.) So I take up the three guidebooks I've read and throw them at him one by one to punctuate my response. "Here...find our for yourself...you fucking creep."

He looks like he's going to kill me but then he stops and tells me to get out of his van. And I say "I thought love means never saying mine." (He said that to me back in Salt Lake City, but now he says he doesn't remember ever saying it. Typical Green.)

So I say "Forget it. What am I going to do, walk around in a fucking hurricane, crying? Fuck you. Go take a nap. I'll figure out how to get home."

"Fine" he says. "But you just better have a plan by the time I wake up."

And if you can believe it, less than five minutes later he's snoring away. Green is unbelievable. He has the sleeping talents of a three-month infant. The way he can turn his emotions on and off. It's psychotic.

So, he sleeps and I plan how to get home. After a while though I start to remember a story your friend, Eric, told me at the going away party you had for me.

His girlfriend broke up with him in Puerto Angel (so, don't ever come here with anyone you care about.) There wasn't a storm or anything, but she took off with a couple of the local fishermen. So he was left to sit and get drunk by himself.

Absentmindedly he started petting one of the wild dogs at his feet. When he looked down the dog stared back with such fear and confusion, as though he couldn't understand why Eric would be doing this, which at first Eric wanted to stop. But he decided to keep going to see if the dog would eventually relax.

The dog did more than that; soon it was writhing in a kind of primordial ecstasy, moaning in a way that made Eric realize that the dog must never have received any love or affection in its life.

So he kept it up until eventually the dog began to relax. Afterwards Eric got so drunk that he ended up stumbling down the beach and passing out. When he woke up the next morning he felt something breathing next to his face. He opened his eyes and it was the dog. Then as he started to get his bearings he realized he was surrounded by dogs. Throughout the night about fifteen wild dogs had curled up next to him like a litter.

I'm not as good a person as Eric is, so I wasn't going to go down to the beach and do this. And anyway it was still pouring rain. But thinking about that story humbled me a lot.

Love will always come to you somehow I figured. Maybe not from the source that you've been pouring yours into, but so what. Green's far from perfect and I doubt we'll stay together. In the long term he'd probably ruin my life with his passive tyrannical ways. But for some reason this seems like the right thing to do now.

Plus it's my birthday in a couple of days and getting off a plane in Montreal, all broken up and broken hearted, is just too much to think about.

So, when Green woke up I apologized, and I admitted that I had indeed twisted reality, which was a really hard thing for me to do. I think it shocked him. I don't think too many people apologize to Green.

It ended up turning into a decent anniversary after all. We couldn't go anywhere because there was no electricity in any of the restaurants. And it got really cold with all the wind and rain outside. So we curled up together against the elements. It's good to be reminded sometimes how much relationships developed from a need to protect yourself against the weather. I wonder now how much the invention of electricity and central heating has contributed to the deterioration of love.

Well, hope things are going okay with you,

Love, Charlotte

The Huatulco Sheraton

August 1, 8 p.m.

Charlotte lies on the bed in their room at the Huatulco Sheraton. This is Green's birthday present to her. She has just taken a shower and feels really clean for the first time since Alex put them up in the Flamingo in Vegas. She is half reading David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. But she's having a hard time concentrating, partly because Green is on the phone with Alice, and it sounds like there's some crisis at *The Sun* and Charlotte doesn't want to eavesdrop. And partly because Foster Wallace's Quebec terrorists are making her homesick. And partly because her eye is hurting.

Last week she finished *Bordering on Chaos*, and she's feeling sad for Mexico and its impossibly complex history. For the moment she misses her city where political problems are comparatively silly. She is starting to realize what a privilege pettiness is. Just a side effect of the common unhappiness that Freud once claimed was the ultimate goal of psychoanalysis.

She twists around on the bed towards the window so as not to look at Green as he lights a cigarette and speaks a little lower to Alice. To avoid absorbing any meaning from his words she focuses on a tennis game outside the window. It's dusk and suddenly the lights from the tennis court go on, shooting neon lime light through the gauzy curtains. The players are engaged in a gentle, flirtatious game, with only the occasional crashing ball. Julio Iglesias drifts into

the room from outdoor speakers. Charlotte has read in one of the guidebooks that Iglesias and Carlos Salinas both own houses in the bay adjacent to the hotel.

Green hangs up the phone. Exhales an exasperated "fuck" and lies there for a while staring up at the white stuccoed ceiling. "Dick just quit." He stubs out his cigarette. Dick Young is the managing editor at *The Sun*.

"Really?" Charlotte is surprised but not shocked. She untwists the towel from her hair.

"That's a very mild 'really'. Did you know anything we didn't know about?"

"Nothing specific. There were always rumors going round that that Dick was going to leave. People were always finding job applications in his wastebasket and stuff."

"Applications to where?"

"Oh ridiculous places. *Time* magazine. I mean I don't know if any of that is true, you know people there, if something isn't happening they'll make it up. But I think it was inevitable anyway. Dick was never really meant for *The Sun*. For Christ sake, his father's an MNA. He's an establishment boy deep down."

"That's true. He's Them"

"Very Them."

"He's no loss. I don't know what Alice is so depressed about. He was expensive, and not worth it."

"No. I can see why she's depressed. He was a good editorialist."

"Are you kidding. He's a fucking Separatist apologist."

"He was not. You're just saying that because he didn't agree with your Hampstead partitionist pals. He's a passionate moderate. There aren't enough of those around."

"Because they're losers. The 'passionate moderates' are just going to let those P.Q. Nazis take our country away from us. And we're just going to let them do it like a bunch of fucking farm animals."

"What's all this 'our country' shit. You're never going back there, Green"

"Who knows? Maybe I will"

"No you won't."

"How do you know?" he says suspiciously.

"Instinct."

"Well, I know something too. But I probably shouldn't tell you."

"Really, what's that?"

"I shouldn't tell you."

"But you have to now. So what is it?"

"You might be going back."

Charlotte says nothing. Her heart has stopped, and she notices that the tennis game has stopped too. Only Julio remains. She feels her nostalgia for Montreal quickly seeping out of her veins, replaced by terror at the thought of returning.

"Why, what's up?" she says weakly.

"You. Your name came up in editorial as a possible replacement for Dick."

"As managing editor?!" The towel falls off her as she sits up.

"Don't make me laugh. No, as the senior columnist."

"Are they crazy?" She feels the terror turn into the warmth of possibility.

"No, just desperate."

"Wow," is all she can say, missing Green's insult.

"It's something for you think about. It would be good for your career."

"I don't know if I want to start thinking about it."

"Well, you're going to have to. That's what they'll be paying you for, thinking.

"Gee."

"And you're going to have to think of shit to say more interesting than 'wow' and 'gee'. Anyway, listen. Think about someone other than yourself for a minute. Alice is really depressed, what should I do? "

"I don't know." Charlotte is still absorbed in her future.

"I think I'm going to send her flowers or something."

"Sure. Go ahead. Send your ex-wife flowers on my birthday."

"This has nothing to do with you. She's bummed."

"I know and you're just carried away with the feeling of giving. And now you just want to give more."

"Exactly. So what do you think I should write on the card."

"I don't give a fuck."

"That message would kind of undermine the action, don't you think."

"You know what I mean. I don't give a fuck what you write."

"I think I'm going to write: 'You never know what will happen.'"

"Sure. That sounds meaningless enough to make it obvious who sent them."

"Fuck you. I'm going to do that right now."

"Good for you. I'm going to think about going back to Montreal."

"Okay. You do that. I'm going to send the flowers right after I get my e-mail."

As the modem screeches Charlotte considers her options. Now that the initial ego boost is over she has to think about this seriously. Going back would mean breaking up with Green. She meant it when she said she didn't think he'd ever go back to Montreal. But that would probably be a good thing.

Getting into political journalism would be a good change from literary journalism. She certainly wouldn't have to read as much. But it would probably mean giving up any thoughts of serious writing, and certainly fiction, which she'd been thinking about more and more recently. Lise Bisonette, publisher of *Le Devoir*, did it. But Charlotte hadn't read her novels and didn't know if she was any good.

And Charlotte knew herself. It would ruin her as a writer. A bit of significance and a regular paycheck would be enough to distract her forever. Then again, that might be a good thing too. But what was her editorial stand

going to be? 'Oh, shut up, all of you. You just don't know how happy you really are!'

"I just got some e-mail from Alex. He wants to know when we're going to be in LA."

"You tell me, Green."

"I'm telling him October. It's going to take us at least two months to get to Costa Rica. I'm sure of it."

"Except if I go back to Montreal."

"You're not going back." Green puts his head on her stomach.

"You never know what's going to happen."

"I do."

"Green. Why would you want me to go to LA?"

"Because I need you."

"Need me for what? I feel like your useless pet. At least in Montreal people have a real purpose for me."

"We have a purpose for you."

"What?"

"Look, right here," he says turning the computer screen towards her.

"Alex writes 'Bring Charlotte. We need her for luck.'"

"Luck! Are you insane? This trip has been a loser-ama since day two."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about that. Things could have been a lot worse."

"How?!"

"You never know."

Charlotte wonders where this radical shift in Green's attitude has come from. But as she starts to consider her future from a different direction, Montreal starts to seem farther and farther away.

Maybe she could have a better life in LA. Dorothy Parker did it. She was making \$5,000 a week writing screenplays. And that was during the Depression.

Charlotte and Green could start a newspaper. Maybe they would be like the cool Canadians who blow into town and take over. For the first time in a long time, an unusually warm current of hope starts to flow through Charlotte's mind. And for this moment the future seems limitless.